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Tinker, Tailor, Soldier . . . CIA Mole?

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If one collected conversational crumbs from some of the best tables in Washington, it would seem that a great spy novel is unfolding in our midst, a plot of treachery searching for its real-life villain.

Perhaps it will be the next great scandal that someday rocks the American government.

Or maybe it is a lot of empty luncheon gossip, laced with the political mischief and bureaucratic malice peculiar to the nation's capital.

The subject is spies, and the unanswered question is whether the Central Intelligence Agency, after all its other troubles of recent years, has another one much more serious. Has the CIA been penetrated somehow by a Soviet "mole," an intelligence officer who has burrowed upward, high enough to betray class and country in the manner of Britain's Kim Philby? Or, perhaps less dramatically, is there a bitter soul selling our secrets for cash?

The CIA director, Stansfield Turner, felt required recently to deny it, while assuring the public that Langley is ever vigilant against the possibility. No one can prove that there is not a "mole" somewhere in the intelligence community. Likewise, no one has anything beyond speculative theories to suggest that there is.

The concept of the mole gained popular currency with John Le Carre's book "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy," in which his persevering hero, George Smiley of Britain's intelligence service, uncovers the Soviet spy who had worked his way to the head of MI6, the British counterpart of the CIA.

Whether or not there is a mole high in the CIA, he, she or it has been invoked to pay off old bureaucratic scores, fortify the cause of tighter secrecy laws or raise suspicions about present or former top CIA officials.

In recent weeks, some important names have expressed concern or asked questions out loud. Former CIA director Richard M. Helms, for instance, remarked to New York magazine:

"The Kampiles case raises the question of whether or not there has been infiltration of the United States intelligence community or government at a significant level."

William Kampiles, an ex-CIA watch officer, was convicted Friday on espionage charges, accused of selling a very secret CIA manual on satellite surveillance to the Soviets. The peculiar circumstances of his access and arrest upset many former intelligence officers and some senators who oversee the subject.

"Deeply disturbed" is the phrase. The case suggested to many that either the CIA is grossly loose and incompetent in its own security or there is a more sinister explanation. Some think both are plausible.

The Kampiles trial was not exactly reassuring, though it did seem to lend weight to the case for incompetence over treachery. Among other things, it was revealed that 13 very secret manuals, not just one are missing. The CIA went beyond its standard response of "no comment" to make this statement: "A review of security procedures within the CIA is now under way."

Helms, for one, was not comforted, reading newspaper accounts of the trial. "There are," he said, "enough anomalies in that case to raise some unresolved questions . . . I still think there are anomalies and unexplained questions."

Former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger has made similar remarks around town. Kissinger, it is said, asks the same questions others raise: Is it possible Kampiles was somehow a pawn, used to conceal another Soviet agent within? Is it plausible that America's intelligence apparatus has been somehow compromised?

For whatever it means, Kissinger has lent his name to a promotional blurb for a new book by Edward Jay Epstein, "Legend," which devotes 316 pages of closely argued fact and theory to the proposition that the CIA was "turned inside out" long before the Kampiles case.

Epstein embraces the view of retired counterintelligence officers who believe their agency has accepted a fake Soviet defector and thereby buried the warning from an earlier defector who said that a "mole" does exist high up. Kissinger thinks the book raises "vital questions."

Perhaps the most bizarre reaction is from fromer director William E. Colby, whose battle with the counter-intelligence folks over domestic spying and other matters was well-aired three years ago. Colby is going around to public appearances and declaring without a trace of humor: "I am not a mole."

Who said he was? Well, nobody did exactly, but that is one of the malicious suggestions afloat in the town's gossip, posed with oblique questions and impish smiles. Colby, who is now a lawyer in private practice, is not amused.

"In my career," Colby said dryly, "I've been accused of just about everything. I answer the allegations. I don't get emotional."

Readers who wish for a clear and definitive answer to the "mole" question will be disappointed. The subject is all smoke and no flames. It leads into a mind-numbing thicket of old cases, lingering coincidences and unproven suppositions.

On the surface of logic, it is easy enough to observe — as many former intelligence officers do — that probability argues strongly for the existence of a planted Soviet agent somewhere in the U.S. intelligence apparatus. If the Russians were able to penetrate the British, German, French and Italian spy organizations, as they have over the years, why should America's be immune? In this twilight realm the strongest argument for the existence of an American "mole" is of spies, that none was ever caught.

Beyond that, however, the evidence gets terribly tangled. Was Nosenko lying? If so, was Galitsin telling the truth? If Igor was a Soviet-controlled double, why did the CIA send Shadrin to his tragic rendezvous in Vienna? Who was Anatoly Filatov and how did the KGB catch him? Why is Fedora still trusted by the FBI? And what of poor Sasha who was fingered by Igor?

You get the idea. These are all deadly serious questions that intelligence professionals kick around among themselves. If they knew firm answers, it might convince them that the Soviets must have had some inside help or, perhaps more scary, that they are still creating false leads to protect someone still inside.

Meanwhile the Russian intelligence officers must be having a good laugh over the Washington gossip. Perhaps they are analyzing it, much the way the CIA would, in search of other explanations, to discover the auxiliary reasons why so much "mole" talk should surface in this particular season.

The KGB analysts might conclude — as Colby and others have — that it is a symptom of institutional stress.

The CIA has been buffeted by public scandal, political reorganizations, leaks and investigations.

Too many of them, according to its supporters. That experience sowed bitterness, especially among those old hands who were "reorganized" out of their clandestine careers; the sour public atmosphere has loosened tongues, inside and out.

"We obviously have a problem with security," Colby said. "That's different from having a 'mole.' There's obviously a lessening of discipline, morale,

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